OPINION

BY SHAHZAD SHARJEEL

Drone on

THERE was a time when aerial photography was possible only from a helicopter; the exception was the KMC fire brigade snorkels, in the service of the MQM, covering party events. Then came drones, and soon no wedding shoot was complete without these contraptions buzzing inside the marquees, capturing guests at different stages of chewing, gulping, slurping, and spilling.

It was a matter of time before these flying demons were put to use for espionage and war. While gluttons fantasised about drone-dropped pizza and fiction writers toyed with plots involving target-killing drones, the invention was also put to good use for crop surveys, forestry, and pest management.

Russia and Ukraine have deployed swarms of drones against each other, and the recent Pakistan-India spat saw drone warfare. Depending upon their size, utility, and sophistication, these could be suicide weapons or the sort that fly back to their bases, that is, if they dodge the anti-drone drones. Among other types, some foreign outlets claimed that Pakistan deployed the Turkish-made Yiha-III and Songar drones. An internet search puts the price of a single unit of the latter between $24,000 and $50,000. India reportedly used the much more expensive Israeli-made Harop/Harpy, the Polish-made Warmate, and the indigenously produced Nagastra-I. The Israeli variants could cost anywhere between $0.5 million and $4m apiece, depending on capability and service contracts.

With the US attacking Venezuela and eyeing Iran, with whom we share a border, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE vying for regional supremacy, and Israel attacking anywhere in the region at will, Pakistan has entered regional defence pacts. Some look at these pacts as the beginning of a Muslim Nato, only the 'bloc' is chock-a-block with Greenland-type enticements to put paid to any such unifying mechanism. Remember how Saddam Hussein was armed and encouraged by the West to think that he could just saunter into Kuwait and help himself to its oilfields.

There is a slight glimmer of hope, although a long shot. For the longest time, I have believed that one way to ensure the Muslim states don't get played against one another and the rest of the world is to establish a joint administration of the holy mosques under a representative body of the Muslim world. The rest of the country could be administered; however, the citizens decide. Why, you may ask, would it work? Well, if a collective defence of the sacred sites is desirable, then a collective administration should be considered as well. If any Muslim country does it in return for bilateral gains only, then it is neither fulfilling a religious duty nor contributing to the peace and stability of the region and the world.

In days gone by, the armed student wing of a party was named the Thunder Squad, apparently to strike fear into its opponents' hearts. Hardly a day passes without one country or another expressing its desire to purchase squadrons of JF-17 Thunder fighter jets. The lightweight, all-weather, day-night aircraft is a joint venture between the Pakistan Aeronautics Complex, Kamra, and Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation of China. According to the PAC site, 58 per cent of production is carried out in Pakistan and the remainder in China. No official numbers are available on the price of these jets, though some reported estimates range between $25m and $30m each. According to media reports, multiple contracts with various countries for the sale of JF-17 Thunder could amount to $20 billion.

> Human development must get most of the profits.

If true, one wonders whether the proceeds from these exports will go into the national kitty and be distributed to the federating units through the National Finance Commission, or whether these receipts will be ringfenced for defence purposes. No matter how innovatively the military-industrial complex raises funds to establish and run the defence infrastructure, it should not claim discretionary control over the proceeds. Public investment and an extremely uneven playing field at the expense of the private sector have helped its development. Human development must get a lion's share of its profits.

The IMF has projected that social sector spending will continue to decline until 2030. We don't need a lender to tell us that the population will grow unchecked, that rates of wasting and stunting among children will persist, that polio will not be eradicated, that traders will not be taxed, and that the salaried will continue to simmer in the pot until they rise to the top, belly up. One can continue to drone on about being a hard state to the point of brittleness. The thunder needs to produce some rain for the parched land, the only motherland we have. ■

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BY MAHIR ALI

Arctic posturing

LATELY, a half-remembered Bee Gees song from long ago has been haunting the mind. It's the one that begins with: "I started a joke, which started the whole world crying/ but I didn't see that the joke was on me…"

When Donald Trump indicated on the eve of his second inauguration a year ago that his longing for Greenland had not diminished since his first term, it was viewed as just another thought bubble, alongside his designs on Canada and the Panama Canal zone. After all, it had been made clear to him in 2019 that the vast, mostly frozen territory wasn't for sale.

But once he gets a bee in his bonnet, it can be hard to dislodge. The US president has sought to justify his redoubled focus on acquiring Greenland by claiming that American might alone can protect the world's largest island from a takeover by Russia or China. The latter has never displayed any such inclination, while the former has enthusiastically been applauding Trump's designs. Moscow's delight barely requires an explanation.

Russia has predictably, and to some extent justifiably, been assailed by its western neighbours for Vladimir Putin's territorial ambitions in Ukraine. So it's amused by the spectacle of the hostile powers scrambling for a response to an American land grab. The US has had designs on Greenland since it bought Alaska from Tsarist Russia in 1867 at the throwaway price of two cents an acre. The Truman administration offered Denmark $100 million in gold bullion to purchase the territory in 1946, but Copenhagen wasn't interested.

However, under a secret agreement concluded in 1951 (but not revealed until 40 years later), Denmark gave the US unlimited use of Greenland for military purposes. That pact has never been rescinded. The Pituffik US military base has existed for decades, but the dozen or so others that were abandoned at the end of the Cold War would require only polite requests to re-establish. That might have been a solution had Trump's interests been purely strategic. But it also illustrates a massive problem.

Once the competing spheres of influence had been established in Europe following World War II, most of East Europe tended to be described in Western media as Soviet satellites. West European nations, on the other hand, were never called out as American dependencies, an arrangement formalised by Nato. Ironically, the reliance on the US for 'security' only expanded following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the USSR's demise.

It would have made sense in the 1990s to incorporate the Russian Federation in European defence arrangements. Stupidly, the focus was on extending Nato's reach to Russia's borders. Putin, initially keen on cooperating with the West, baulked at the idea of Georgia and Ukraine being invited into Nato. That's not the only reason for his misguided violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, but he can surely be excused a spot of schadenfreude as his inveterate adversaries in Europe struggle to respond to the threat of US aggression against one of its most servile allies on the continent.

Denmark has long served as an obsequious handmaiden of US imperialism, willing to commit war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hence its discombobulation at being turned into a potential target. The Danish colonisation of Greenland (initially alongside its Scandinavian neighbours) is justly resented by the territory's Inuit inhabitants. Among the now self-governing island's 57,000 people, around 85 per cent reportedly want complete independence from Denmark. A similar proportion disdains the idea of forcibly being turned into Americans.

> Europe struggles to hold on to Greenland.

The EU has plucked up the courage to whimper about its American masters' stated intentions, including the threat to impose 10pc, and eventually 25pc, tariffs on states that oppose Greenland's takeover. There's been talk of triggering countertariffs, but that's unlikely to make much headway when European ministers meet tomorrow. Europe is paying the price for having latched on to Uncle Sam's hindquarters for far too long, and its current predicament deserves little sympathy. Ursula von der Leyen is hardly the kind of figurehead who can proclaim European independence, while even Dutch courage would be too much to expect from Nato's Mark Rutte, who infamously called Trump 'daddy', and is lost for words when the pater familias goes rogue.

New shipping routes and Greenland's rare earths are also in the mix as climate change advances with the US administration's eager (and egregious) imprimatur, and this week's Davos conclave should provide more entertainment as Trump comes face to face with his reluctant detractors. Meanwhile, the song cited at the outset concludes on a sombre note: "I fell out of bed hurting my head from the things that I said/ 'Til I finally died — which started the whole world living." If only it were that simple. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

50pc electricity wasted

KARACHI: Fifty per cent of the total electricity generated in the country ... is lost in faulty distribution and transmission system. The WAPDA is producing 1,300 mw and KESC 700 mw of electricity, out of which the losses of the former is 35 per cent and the latter 15 per cent, according to an unofficial study. In terms of money, the losses mean a total of Rs 40 crores annually and to save these losses, experts said it involves an expenditure of Rs 40 to 50 crores, which can be recovered within two years. To avoid these losses the WAPDA and KESC are required to import capacitors, introduce integrated load dispatching system and use better conducting on transmission and distribution lines... .

Maximum energy utilisation and conservation has become a necessity in the wake of energy crisis since 1973 and consequently the Prime Minister ... approved a proposal to undertake a nationwide energy conservation and austerity campaign. Its main purpose was to minimise the wasteful uses of various forms of energy, in various sectors, and to exhort the end-consumers to maximise efficiency of energy utilisation. — Correspondent

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

London visit 'worthwhile'

KARACHI: Mr Liaquat Ali Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, who returned … this [Jan 21] morning from London after attending the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, told Pressmen ... that his visit ... on the whole was worthwhile. The Prime Minister expressed the hope that the Security Council would take the Kashmir dispute by about the end of this month.

… The Prime Minister further stated that he had not opposed the proposal of Mr Robert G. Menzies, Australian Prime Minister, for sending a Commonwealth force in Kashmir to maintain security during … plebiscite. "I do not think Mr Menzies has been correctly reported," said Mr Liaquat Ali Khan … [on] the reported statement of the Australian Prime Minister made in London that both sides had rejected the proposal… . — Staff correspondent

[Meanwhile, according to news agencies in Washington,] President Truman made a strong personal attack on Premier Stalin … linking him with "all dictators who sought the enslavement of the common people." … Mr Truman declared: "There is not any difference between Hitler, Mussolini, Charles the first of England, Louis XIV of France and other dictators and the Russian leader. They are all just alike."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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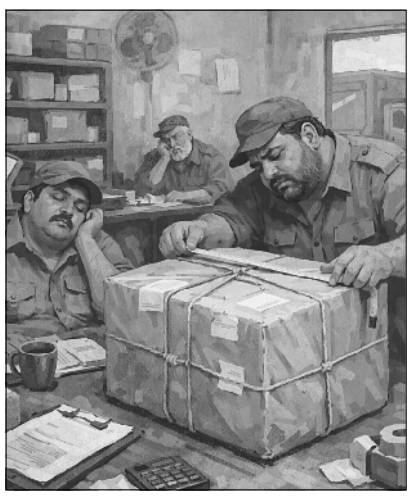
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

Pakistan Post needs to re-energise itself



PAKISTAN Post, despite its long and glorious history and vast infrastructure in the country, is suffering from a relentless and largely unchecked financial decline. This deterioration is intensifying with each passing day, with few visible signs of reversal. Such a decline cannot be attributed solely to lower-level employees; rather, it is the cumulative result of failures at both ends of the institutional spectrum.

On the one hand, an inexperienced, lethargic, technologically illiterate, backdoor-inducted, ego-centric and ethically indifferent workforce at the operational level bears part of the responsibility. On the other hand, those entrusted with leadership, policymaking, strategic planning and accountability are equally responsible for the present state of affairs.

As such, the newly introduced policy of measuring parcels at post offices to determine delivery charges is irrational and impractical, and it is in urgent need of an overhaul. Negative consequences of this knee-jerk decision have now begun to surface quite clearly. The primary motivation behind this policy was the practice in certain districts in northern Pakistan, where people frequently used Pakistan Post to receive and send quilts, blankets, pillows and other items that are light in weight but bulky in volume.

Due to the disproportionately high handling and transportation costs involved in delivering such consignments at subsidised rates, Pakistan Post opted to introduce and implement volumetric measurement.

However, a critical and burning question remains unanswered: should the same policy have been imposed uniformly across all other regions of the country? No convincing justification can be offered, as the decision appears to have been taken without adequate research, brainstorming, pilot testing, or careful consideration of its wider consequences. The results are immediate and severe. Parcel bookings at post offices across Pakistan reportedly declined massively within days. Customers are increasingly shifting to cheaper private courier companies that offer free packing materials and comparatively lower charges, and which do not intimidate customers by theatrically pulling out a measuring tape at the counter.

In effect, the simple measurement of a parcel has become a measurement of the customer's pocket and paying capacity. As a result, only parcels destined for remote rural areas are now being booked through Pakistan Post, while urban deliveries are rapidly being monopolised by private courier services. Simply put, public capital is being diverted into private hands.

Pakistan Post is, indeed, a state-owned institution, established to provide affordable, subsidised and hassle-free services to the people. State institutions, by their very nature, are meant to promote public welfare and convenience. They are not supposed to impose unnecessary burdens and high charges.

A separate and well-thought-out policy for oversized and high-volume parcels can certainly be formulated. However, such a policy must strike a balance, providing relief to the public while simultaneously expanding the business and revenue base of Pakistan Post. It should be our collective obligation and national responsibility to transform Pakistan Post into a financially viable and profitable institution without compromising its role as a public welfare service. Policies and decisions must be grounded in the principle of sustainable development, emphasising long-term gains rather than short-sighted measures aimed at immediate but fleeting benefits.

Qamar Abbas Warraich
Faisalabad

Aussie ban reality

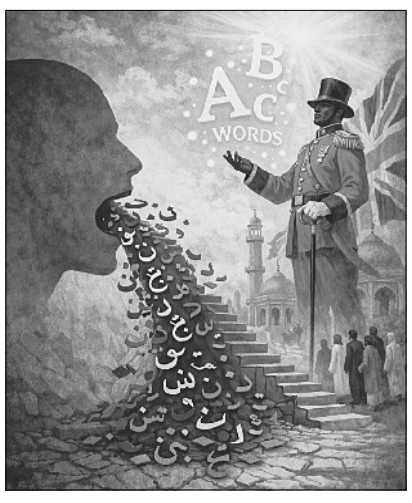
A FEW weeks ago, Australia imposed a ban on social media usage for those aged below 16 years, and a large number of accounts have been shut down since. Though the ban was put into effect out of the government's concern for children, it did come only after many in Australia had started asking their government to end its involvement in the genocide taking place in Palestine. As is the trend worldwide, it is the young who have taken up this fight against their respective governments in the West. The ban is about stifling the voice of the young.

American tech-based company Meta is also leading a similar campaign against any anti-Israel reporting under the guise of protecting children. Meta is notorious for refusing to tell the truth about Israeli genocide against the indigenous children of Palestine by blocking any news that it deems critical of the occupiers. Meta has acted on 95 per cent of Israeli demands to take down Instagram and Facebook posts that go against Israel and its killings of Palestinians.

According to Pew Research, sympathies of 47 pc of people aged 65 years and above are mostly pro-Israel, while those under 30 years happen to be pro-Palestine. Older generations have been fed a steady diet of pro-Israel lies by controlled Western media or years. The younger people, however, are tech-savvy and get their information from social media platforms, and they do not favour the genocidal regime. Australia is 'concerned' about its children, but it favours a regime that is killing children in Palestine. The ban will likely work for both Israel and Australia; two settler colonies that know how to defend each other.

Angabeen Ahmad
Karachi

Colonial mentality



THE colonial mentality that manifests itself through language-based discrimination and the creation of an artificial linguistic hierarchy is a deeply ingrained psychological and social issue in society. Pakistan is a linguistically rich nation. Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Hindko, Siraiki and many other languages represent not only modes of communication, but also collective memory, culture and identity. Yet, fluency in English is widely treated as a marker of intelligence, competence and social status, while speaking local languages is often unfairly associated with backwardness.

This mindset is a direct inheritance of the colonial rule. The British administration deliberately elevated English as the sole language of power, governance and prestige, while indigenous languages were sidelined. Unfortunately, decades after independence, this colonial culture continues to dominate our education system, bureaucracy and society at large.

Psychological studies and educational research show that learning in one's mother tongue enhances comprehension, creativity and critical thinking. Despite this body of evidence, our systems continue to accord privilege to English in examinations, courts, official documentation as well as employment processes, effectively marginalising a large portion of the population.

Most developed countried have progressed academically, technologically and economically while operating primarily in their native languages. Our insistence on equating English proficiency with merit does not reflect modernity, it reflects a loss of cultural confidence.

This erosion of linguistic self-respect weakens our social cohesion and disconnects us from our own intellectual heritage. Proficiency in English is good because it is the global lingua franca, but it should not be a measure of human worth.

True progress lies in ending this colonial mentality and restoring dignity to all local languages. Until we do so, inequality would continue, and confidence would remain tied to accent rather than ability.

Wasif Khaliq Dad
Rawalpindi

Death traps

THE service road off Sharea Faisal in the Baloch Colony commercial area between National Bank and Tipu Sultan Road turns into a lake every time it rains. In the last downpour, water rose to nearly four feet, flooding shops and offices. The stormwater drain running along this stretch — over a kilometre long — has been choked with garbage, silt and debris for more than two decades. It has never been properly cleaned. Matters worsened when stormwater drains and sewerage lines were merged a few years ago, causing sewage to flow continuously into the stormwater system and block it completely.

To compound the matter, the drains are sealed with heavy concrete slabs without manholes or access points, making even basic maintenance impossible. The devastation caused by the torrential rain a few months ago was a man-made disaster. Had the stormwater drains been functional, the water might have risen a foot or two, not four. The scale of damage was the direct result of long-standing official negligence.

Since 2023, area residents have been lodging written complaints with various civic bodies. A petition to the provincial ombudsman led to only a token 100-metre repair of the drain, which is meaningless for a drain running over a kilometre.

Karachi once had civic departments that responded to citizens' concerns. That era now feels distant. Will anyone in authority order urgent desilting and reconstruction of this critical drain before the next monsoon turns a commercial area into a lake?

Sameer Hamid Dodhy
Karachi

▶ **COURSE COMPLETION:** The persistent pressure to complete academic courses within specific timelines undermines the quality of education. Teachers are compelled to prioritise syllabus completion over meaningful learning. Consequently, lessons are delivered hastily, conceptual clarity is sacrificed, and students are encouraged to rely on rote memorisation rather than critical understanding. The situation is further aggravated by excessive teacher workloads, overcrowded classrooms and administrative responsibilities, leaving little scope for individualised attention or academic reinforcement. This approach produces formally certified graduates who often lack essential skills and competencies. Without introducing realistic academic planning, flexible curricula and teacher-centred reforms, Pakistan's education system risks perpetuating the existing systemic educational failure.
Habibullah Bhutto
Khairpur Mirs

▶ **HOSPITAL NEEDED:** Machat, a small village located nearly 100km from Turbat city in Balochistan, lacks a healthcare facility, forcing area residents to rely entirely on distant urban hospitals. In medical emergencies, patients have to be transported to Turbat, often over poor roads and without proper ambulance services. Women, children and the elderly suffer the most. Expectant mothers, road accident victims, and patients gripped by some sudden illnesses face serious risks due to the absence of nearby medical services. The government should establish at least a basic health unit in Machat.
Museera Zia
Dasht

▶ **ONLINE CONTENT:** One of the most alarming problems associated with social media is the increase in children's exposure to unsuitable content. Minors sometimes get distracted, too. I have often seen advertisements with explicit content that can have several behavioural, psychological and social effects on children. The government should do what it should, and parents should closely monitor their children's online activity.
Wania Usman
Lahore

External Ombudsman

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